

OMB decision: No SmartCentres at Eastern Ave

Dear colleagues, dear friends,

I am delighted to report that the City of Toronto, together with the community organization East Toronto Community Coalition (ETCC) was successful in convincing the Ontario Municipal Board (OMB) that large-scale retail, as it was suggested by SmartCentres and Toronto Film Studios, is not appropriate along Eastern Avenue in Leslieville. The new Official Plan earmarks this area as “employment district” with the idea to keep this land for light-industrial usage and research-oriented jobs. A shopping mall would contradict these guidelines from the Official Plan. According to the written decision by vice-chair James McKenzie, the Site-Specific Applications “do not represent good land use planning” and therefore cannot be approved. This means that SmartCentres can’t go ahead with its plans to turn the former site of the Toronto Film Studios into a 700,000 sq shopping centre.

The 58-day hearing lasted from May to October 2008, and the decision of the OMB Board was made public on March 4, 2009. The hearing mobilized a significant number of people that are working or living in the area. It also received regular media attention.

The City Institute at York University was involved in the case via two expert witnesses who represented the interests of ETCC: myself in the role as an urban planner and Steven Tufts as an economic geographer. We also received support from Thorben Wieditz who is a PhD student at the Faculty of Environmental Studies. The third expert witness for ETCC was Paul Young who spoke to health and traffic issues. We were supported by a large number of people coming forward at the three public events, with 4:1 expressing concern against the shopping mall development.

In the hearing we argued that the area had developed into a mature film cluster and that the introduction of a large-scale shopping mall on site would not only jeopardize the filigree networks of this cluster but quite possible also destabilize the entire area through development pressures. Further, we suggested that the shopping centre would mainly create precarious forms of work and that the traffic increase would lead to negative impacts in the liveability of the adjacent neighborhood. Therefore, we concluded, the development can’t be in the public interest. At the very end of a 57 page written decision, and after criticizing the City for its planning approach, the Board agreed with the aspect that the proposal is not good land-use planning. We won!

Ute Lehrer, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
FES, York University
on sabbatical leave at Université de Montpellier